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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE
LEGENDS OF ST. BRENDAN

A COMPARISON OF AN EPISODE IN
THE *NAVIGATIO* WITH ONE IN *PERLESVAUS*
AND THE *VOYAGE OF MAELDUIN*

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

1933

By
MARY MARJORIE WILLIAMSON

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THE DREAM OF CAHUS IN *PERLESVAUS*

A PARALLEL between an incident in Branch I of the *Perlesvaus* and one in two Irish *imrama*—the *Voyage of Maelduin* and the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*—has never, so far as I can discover, been pointed out. The incident is an adventure of the squire Cahus, which is used to make clear to King Arthur that he must pay his visit to the chapel of St. Austin alone. The night before their departure the squire dreams that the king left him and that he himself went in search of his master. On this journey he has the following adventure:

Quant il ot chevauchié grant piece, s'entra en une grant forest, e esgardoit en la voie par devant lui, e veoit les esclous du cheval le roi ce li ert avis; e sui la trace grant piece, tant qu'il vint en une lande de la forest, e qu'il se pensa que li rois ert iluec descenduz, o assez pres, car la ferre li estoit faillie. Il regarda a destre e vit une chapele enmi la lande, e voit environ un grant cimetiere o il avoit molt sarqueux, ce li ert avis. Il se pensa en sonjant q'il iroit avant a la chapele, car il cuidoit que li rois i fust entrez por orer. Il ala cele part e descendi. Quant li vallez fu descenduz il atacha son roncín e entra dedenz la chapele. Il n'i vit nului ne d'une part ne d'autre, fors un chevalier qui gisoit enmi la chapele deseur une litiere, e estoit coverz d'un riche drap de soie, e estoient .iiii. estavauz environ lui ardant, qui estoient fichié en quatre chandelabres d'or. Li vallez se merveilla molt durement comment cil cors estoit iluec si seus lessiez, car n'avoit avec lui fors les ymages. E plus se merveilloit du roi qu'il ne trovoit; car il no savoit quel part gerre. Il osta un des estavauz, et prent le chandelabre d'or e le met entre sa huese e sa cuisse, e ist fors de la chapele e remonte seur son roncín. Si s'en va e trespasse le cimetiere, e ist fors de la lande, e entre en la forest; e se pensa qu'il ne cesseroit s'avroit le roi trouvé.

Si com il entroit en son chemin, si vit venir devant lui un home noir e let, e estoit assez graindres a pié que cil n'estoit a cheval, e tenoit .i. grant cotel agu en sa main, a .ii. trenchanz, ce li estoit avis. Li vallez va encontre lui grant aleüre, e li dist: "Vos qui la venez, encontrastes vos le roi Artu en ceste forest?—Naie, fet cil, mes vos é encontré, dont ge sui molt liez en mon cuer, car vos estes partiz de la chapele comme lerres e comme traîtres; vos en apportez le chandelabre d'or mauvesement, de coi li chevaliers ert ennorez qí gist en la chapele morz. Si vueil que vos le me rendez, si le reporteré; o, se ce non, ge vos desfi.—Par foi, fet li vallez, ge ne vos en rendré mie, ainz l'enporteré, s'en feré present le roi Artu.—Par foi, fet cil, vos le conperrez molt chier, se no me rendez molt tost." E li valez fiert des esperons, e cuide celui

otrer; e cil le haste, e le fiert du cotel o destre costé si qu'il li enbat o cors desq'enz o manche. Li vallez, qui gisoit en la sale a Carduell, q' ce ot songié, s'esveilla e cria a haute voiz: "Sainte Marie! le provoivre! Aidiez! aidiez! car ge sui morz."

Li rois e la roïne e li chanbellenc oïrent le cri. Il saillirent sus e distrent au roi: "Sire, vos poez bien movoir, il est jors." Li rois se fet vestir e chaucier. E cil crie a tel pooir com il a: "Amenez moi le provoivre, car ge muir!" Li rois i va en haste, e la roïne e li chanbellenc i portent grant tortiz de chandoiles. Li rois li demande que il a, e cil li conte ainsi com il a songié. "A! fet li rois, est ce dont songes?—Oil, sire, fet il. Mes il m'est molt ledement avez." Il hauça le bras senestre. "Sire, fet il, esgardez ça. Vez ci le cotel qui m'est o cors desq'au manche." Après met la main a sa heuse o li chandelabres d'or estoit. Il le trest fors, e le mostra le roi. "Sire, fet il, por cest chandelabre sui ge navrez a mort, dont ge vos faz present." Li rois prent le chandelabre, e le regarde a merveilles, car onques mes si riche n'avoit veü. Li rois le mostre la roïne. "Sire, fet li vallez, ne sachiez mie le cotel de mon cors devant que ge soie confés." Li rois mande son chapelain, e le fet confesser e fere sa droiture molt bien. Li rois meïsmes li trest le cotel du cors, e l'enme s'en parti lués. Li rois li fist fere son servise e molt richement ensevelir e enterrer.¹

A similar episode in the Latin text of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* tells how St. Brendan sets sail for the "terra repromissionis"² with fourteen monks. As he is leaving, three other monks unexpectedly join the company. After long sailing, they sight an island, where they land with difficulty.

Porro ambulanti per ripas maris occurrit illis canis per quamdam semitam et venit ad pedes sancti Brandani, sicut solent canes venire ad pedes dominorum suorum. Tunc sanctus Brandanus dixit fratribus suis: "Nonne bonum nuntium donavit nobis Deus? Sequimini eum." Tunc sanctus Brandanus cum fratribus suis secuti sunt canem usque in oppidum.

Intrantes autem in oppidum viderunt aulam magnam ac stratam lectulis et sedilibus aquamque ad pedes lavandos. Cum autem resedissent, precepit sanctus Brandanus sociis suis dicens: "Cavete, fratres, ne Sathanas perducatur nos in temptationem: video enim illum suadentem uni ex fratribus tribus qui post nos venerunt de nostro monasterio de furto pessimo. Orate pro anima eius, nam caro in potestatem Sathane tradita est." Illa domus in qua residebant erat quasi inserta per parietes in circuitu dependentibus vasculis diversi generis metalli frenisque et cornibus circumdatis argento. Tunc sanctus Brandanus dixit ministro suo qui solebat panem apponere fratribus:

¹ *Perlesvaus*, ed. Nitze and Jenkins (Chicago, 1932), ll. 125-77.

² The "Terre de Promision" is mentioned in line 7243 of the *Perlesvaus*. This may show the influence of the *Navigatio*; on the other hand it may only be used in the sense of "The Holy Land"; cf. Heinzel, *Über die französischen Gralromane*, p. 172, n. 1.

"Fer prandium quod nobis Deus misit." Qui statim surrexit invenitque mensam positam et lintheamina et panes singulos miri candoris et pisces.¹

In a similar fashion they find drink, and the beds prepared. While the monks are sleeping, "vidit sanctus pater opus diaboli: infantem ethyopem habentem frenum in manu et jocantem ante fratrem predictum." Immediately Brendan rises to pray for the monk. The next day food again miraculously appears, and this happens for three days in all. Then they prepare to leave the island; Brendan warns them not to take anything with them.

Tunc sanctus pater dixit: "Ecce frater noster quem predixi vobis heri, habet argenteum frenum in sinu suo quem hac nocte tradidit illi diabolus." Cum hec audisset predictus frater, jactavit frenum de sinu suo et cecidit ante pedes viri Dei dicens: "Pater, peccavi! Ora pro anima mea ne pereat." Confestim omnes simul prosternebant se ad terram deprecantes Deum pro anima fratris. Elevantes autem simul fratres a terra elevatoque fratre a predicto sancto patre, ecce viderunt ethyopem parvulum salire de sinu suo et ululantem voce magna ac dicentem: "Cur me, vir Dei, jactas de mea habitacione in qua habitavi VII annos et facis me alienari ab hereditate mea?" Sanctus Brendanus ad hanc vocem ait: "Precipio tibi in nomine Jhesu Christi ut nullum hominem leseris usque in diem judicii." Iterum conversus vir Dei ad predictum fratrem ait: "Sume corpus et sanguinem Dei quia anima tua modo egredietur de corpore tuo: hic etenim habes locum sepulture tue. En frater tuus qui venit tecum a monasterio nostro in inferno habet locum sepulture." Itaque accepta eucharistia anima fratris egressa est de corpore susceptaque ab angelis lucis videntibus fratribus. Conditum est autem corpus in eodem loco a sancto patre predicto.²

The analogy between these stories must be largely one of structure rather than of details, since the Cahus episode (P) is written in courtly style and the *Brendan* (B) is wholly monastic. The plot of the story is simple, and both P and B agree in this outline: The adventurer arrives at an uninhabited place;³ he steals a precious article; death is the result of the theft.⁴

¹ Carl Schroeder, *Sancti Brandani: Ein lateinischer und drei deutsche Texte* (Erlangen, 1871), pp. 7-9. Schroeder dates this s. xii (p. xv). Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (New York, 1929), I, 415, says that it is a copy of an older Latin version.

² Schroeder, *loc. cit.*

³ The uninhabited house ready for the guest is a folk-lore motif such as is found in *Beauty and the Beast*.

⁴ We cannot, of course, attach much importance to the agreement of two tales in the possession of so simple a plot. We find the plot again in the famous story "Percute hic" (*Gesta Romanorum*, ed. H. Oesterley [Berlin, 1872], II, 438, chap. cvii), which is no doubt quite independent of the story we are considering here. "Percute hic," it will be remembered, tells of a clerk who, by following the instructions over a certain statue, found

But the parallelism between P and B extends also to certain striking details: (1) The men are guided to the place: by marks of horses' hoofs (P), by a dog (B). (2) The place is uninhabited, but gives an impression of having been occupied not long since: by burning tapers (P), by tables set with food and drink (B). (3) The place has rich furnishings: the dead knight is covered with a cloth of silk, and around him are gold candlesticks (P); in B the walls are decorated with vessels, bridles, and "cornibus" of precious metals. (4) An article is stolen: a golden candlestick (P), a bridle (B). (5) The theft occurs at night. (6) The thief is in the act of escaping when he is halted. (7) The article is hidden in the clothing: in the hose (P), in the garment (B). (8) The thief is accused of stealing, and is asked to give up the article. (9) Death is promised as a penalty for the deed. (10) The thief takes the sacrament and dies.

A further marked similarity is that the incident happens not to the leaders of the company, that is, Arthur and Brendan, but to a minor actor: in P to Arthur's squire, who was asked to accompany the king only at Guenevere's entreaty; in B to one of the monks who intruded on the journey. The accuser in B is Brendan because he is the "sanctus pater," and in P should be Arthur to parallel the *Brendan*. Arthur, however, is not a holy man with divine knowledge, though he is a king, and furthermore, is not near the chapel at the time of the theft. Therefore, P introduces the Black Knight, who can be imagined to be a fairy creature with supernatural knowledge. His blackness makes him equivalent to the "infantem ethyopem," and allies him in the mind of the reader to the devil.

A few differences are to be found, but they are minor and do not alter the general similarity of the two incidents. When the thief is accused, he yields the article immediately in B; but in P he does not, and this gives an additional reason for his death. The squire of P re-

himself in an underground palace. The hall was lighted by a carbuncle; at the table were a king and queen dressed in rich garments; in one corner of the room was a man standing with a drawn bow in his hand. In another room were very beautiful women silently working on purple cloths. The stables were full of horses, which, by touching, the clerk found to be stone. He visited the whole palace and found in it everything the heart desired. Fearing that his story of the place would not be believed, he decided to take something as proof. On a table he saw gold cups and knives; he took a cup and a knife and placed them in his garment (*in sinu suo*). The image with the bow directed an arrow at the carbuncle and shattered it. The place was in darkness. The clerk, not being able to find his way out, perished in the palace.

turns to court before dying, but the monk of B dies on the island and the rest continue their journey. The squire presents the candlestick to Arthur, who gives it to St. Paul's in London (is this to explain the presence of a certain candelabra in that cathedral?), while the monk's bridle is left on the island. In B death is brought about by divine dispensation; in P it is caused by a knife wound. The incident in B takes place in three days and nights, in P in a few hours of one night. The place is a chapel in P, an "oppidum" in B. The monk in B is tempted by a visible devil; in P no devil is present, though the sight of the candlesticks in an empty chapel is the squire's temptation.

So much for the Latin *Brendan*. The old Latin version which was the original of the twelfth-century text was used also by Benedeit, a monk, who in 1121 wrote the Anglo-Norman *Brendan* for Queen Adaliza, wife of King Henry I.¹ He modified and elaborated his text, so that it differs somewhat from the twelfth-century Latin text. But the episode under discussion² is only slightly changed. These are the differences between it and the Latin *Brendan*: (1) The voyagers are led to the place by a path (no dog). (2) The place is a palace, and an elaborate description is given. (3) The monk steals a golden goblet. (4) The explanation of how Brendan saw the deed in the night "sans candeile" is elaborated. (5) The "infantem ethyopem" is "li diables." These differences are slight enough to be disregarded, for the story structure is not changed.

The third analogous story is in episode XI of the *Voyage of Maelduin*.³ The relation of *Brendan* and *Maelduin* has been the subject of much consideration. Some scholars say that *Maelduin* is later than *Brendan*; others, that it is earlier. Heinrich Zimmer⁴ maintained that *Maelduin* was earlier (ca. eighth century) and that the *Voyage of St. Brendan* was modeled on it about the eleventh century. The latest opinion⁵ is that the *Voyage of Maelduin* is earlier than the *Brendan*, but that in the extant manuscript of the former there are reborrowings from the latter. However this may be, both of the stories are sufficiently early for this analogue to be of interest to Grail scholars.

¹ Waters, *Voyage of St. Brendan* (Oxford, 1928), p. xxiii.

² Ll. 265-355.

³ Ed. Whitely Stokes in *Revue celtique*, IX (1888), 477.

⁴ *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, XXXIII (1889), 180.

⁵ Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, p. 411, n. 144.

. . . . They sighted an island which was not large, and therein (stood) a fort surrounded by a white, high rampart as if it were built of burnt lime, or as if it were all one rock of chalk. Great was its height from the sea: it all but reached the clouds. The fort was open wide. Round the rampart were great, snow-white houses. When they entered the largest of these they saw no one there, save a small cat which was in the midst of the house, playing on the four stone pillars that were there. It was leaping from each pillar to the other. It looked a little at the men, and did not stop itself from its play. After that they saw three rows on the wall of the house round about, from one doorpost to the other. A row there, first, of brooches of gold and of silver, with their pins in the wall, and a row of neck-torques of gold and silver: like hoops of a vat was each of them. The third row (was) of great swords, with hilts of gold and silver. The rooms were full of white quilts and shining garments. A roasted ox, moreover, and a fitch in the midst of the house, and great vessels with good intoxicating liquor. "Hath this been left for us?" saith Maelduin to the cat. It looked at him suddenly and began to play again. Then Maelduin recognized that it was for them that the dinner had been left. So they dined and drank and slept. They put the leavings of the liquor into the pots, and stored up the leavings of the food. Now when they proposed to go, Maelduin's third foster-brother said: "Shall I take with me a necklace of these necklaces?" "Nay," saith Maelduin, "not without a guard is the house." Howbeit he took it as far as the middle of the enclosure. The cat followed them, and leapt through him (the foster-brother) like a fiery arrow, and burnt him so that he became ashes, and (then) went back till it was on its pillar. Then Maelduin soothed the cat with his words, and set the necklace in its place, and cleansed the ashes from the floor of the enclosure, and cast them on the shore of the sea.¹

There is much Celtic, pagan material in this episode; but the story is the same as that in the *Perlesvaus* and in *Brendan*. (1) The house on the island is empty save for a cat (M), a dog (B), the dead knight (P). (2) The house has in it costly articles. (3) Food and drink are ready for the voyagers. (4) An insignificant person, the foster-brother (and not Maelduin) is the thief. (5) He attempts to take one of the necklaces (*muinice*). (6) The cat, like the Black Knight, is a supernatural creature. (7) Maelduin, like Brendan, warns the brother not to take the necklace (Cahus is alone and has no one to warn him in P). (8) In P, B, and M the thief starts off, but is stopped before he is out of the vicinity of the building. (9) The simile of the cat "like a fiery arrow" killing the brother is equivalent to the description of the Black Knight and his knife. (10) As in B, the necklace is returned to its

¹ *Revue celtique*, IX, 477.

proper place. (11) The hero journeys on: Maelduin and Brendan to other islands, Arthur on to the chapel of St. Austin. Since *Maelduin* is not a Christian story, there is no need for the sacrament at the end. Also the ashes of the brother are scattered on the seashore, while the thieves in P and B are given burial.¹

There are, then, three analogous stories: the *Voyage of Maelduin*, eighth century, secular and pagan; *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, twelfth century, monastic, Christian; *Perlesvaus*, thirteenth century, courtly, Christian. Apparently the author of the *Perlesvaus* remembered, or had at hand, this story from Celtic tradition; but did not understand it or know how to handle it, with the confusing result that the incident as he tells it is partly a dream and partly real.

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¹ For a different version of the *Percute hic* story (above, p. 7, n. 4), see William of Malmesbury, *De gestis regum anglorum*, Vol. II, chap. x.

